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THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

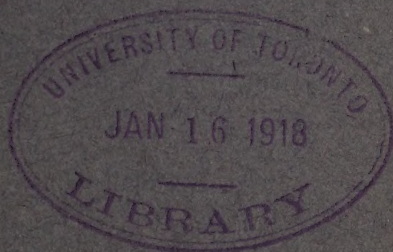


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BY

PAUL ALBERT HELMER

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THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

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THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

I.

THE RIGHTS OF FRANCE.

FOR nearly half a century the situation created by the union of Alsace-Lorraine to the German Empire has weighed heavily upon the position of the Western Powers. Recent discussions and official declarations have shown that one of the first tasks of the negotiators of a future peace will concern the final settlement of the ownership of the territories which victorious Germany tore from France in 1870. The importance of this problem and of its solution cannot be estimated without reference to the condition in which the "Reichsland" was ceded by the Treaty of Frankfort. Only thus is it possible to define with precision the moral and political character of the annexation.

When on September 2, 1870, Bismarck met General Wimpffen at Sedan he said to him: "We want at last to ensure the safety of our children, and for that reason there must be a *glacis* between France and us. We must have a territory, fort-

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

resses, and frontiers that will protect us, once for all, against your attacks.”

This demand, which was renewed some days later in dealing with Jules Favre, changed the character of the war. French national union, slowly and laboriously effected under different systems of government in the course of centuries, was to be destroyed. Provinces which, by their patriotism and their devotion to the nation, had become for France a symbol of her prosperity and prestige in the world were to be separated from her and subjected to foreign domination.

DISMEMBERMENT RESISTED.

France resisted this outrageous demand as long as the hastily formed and ill-equipped armies raised by Gambetta were able to continue the struggle with the faintest hope of success. Though forced to submit to the will of the victor, she has never forgotten the humiliating conditions imposed upon her. Never has she consented to regard her dismemberment as final ; never has she accepted a reconciliation that would have consigned the past to oblivion. She kept her faith in the immanent justice of history and awaited trustfully the day when the insatiable ambition of Germany should again provoke a conflict and enable her to efface the stain and the shame of the *année terrible*.

As in dealing with France, so in regard to neutrals and to the German people itself, Bismarck sought to justify the annexation

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

by the necessity of obtaining "strategic guarantees" and of creating a *glacis* against France. This idea inspired both his diplomatic notes of September 13 and 16, 1870, and his later speeches to the Reichstag. To neutrals he dared to say :—

In more than twenty wars with France we have never been the aggressors. All we ask of her is the safety of our country, which she has so often threatened. By taking from France, who has troubled Europe, the means of offensive action, we are acting in the interest of Europe, which is the maintenance of peace.

It is of the utmost importance, in judging the character of the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, to note that neither Bismarck nor the official German organs ever put forward any other plea in justification of the conquest than the determination to separate Germany from France by a *glacis*. German statesmen contemptuously left to journalists and pamphleteers, historians and novelists, the arguments based on race, language, and "historical rights." They invoked only force and "strategic necessity."

THE GERMAN PLEA.

This official German thesis is founded on one of the falsehoods frequently to be found in the German reading of history—the assertion that war-like France has always attacked pacific Germany. At the very moment when this thesis was put forward by Bismarck, Prussia had just let loose hostilities by the falsification of the

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

Ems dispatch at the moment she thought most favourable.

Since then, the aggressions she contemplated in 1875 and 1887, the international crises brought about by her on the Morocco question in 1905, 1906, 1908, and 1911, and the support she gave to Austria in 1909 and 1914, have revealed even to the most prejudiced eyes the true whereabouts of the aggressor. The invention of the "bombardment of Nuremberg" in order to justify the declaration of war upon France in 1914 was a worthy sequel to the falsification of the Ems dispatch.

But Bismarck, by confining himself to a single argument, has rendered easier the task of the Allies. Can it be said that Germany, the aggressive disturber of the peace, is entitled to those "strategic guarantees," to that *glacis* which gave her, in respect of France, the military advantages that she abused in order to challenge the whole of Europe?

LOYALTY OF ALSACE-LORRAINE.

For France a point of honour and dignity, for Europe a question of safety and equilibrium, the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine is for the civilised world a moral question of justice and liberty. The inhabitants of the annexed provinces, deeply attached to the French Motherland, have affirmed in the most formal fashion their will to remain French. Among them there was never the slightest tendency to detach themselves from France.

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

During the war of 1870 they offered most violent resistance to the German Armies, and all the candidates for election to the National Assembly of Bordeaux undertook to oppose with all their strength the cession of their country. The moment the Assembly met, the members for Alsace and Lorraine solemnly placed before it a unanimous declaration affirming the determination of their electors to remain French ; and when the draconian terms of peace were submitted to the Assembly, the Alsatian spokesman, Keller, made a last effort to secure the rejection of the treaty. In a touching peroration he said :—

I feel bound to protest against a treaty which, to my eyes, is an injustice, a falsehood, and a disgrace ; and should the Assembly ratify it I appeal beforehand to God, vindicator of just causes. I appeal to posterity, who will judge us all. I appeal to the peoples of the world, who cannot allow themselves for ever to be sold like brute cattle. I appeal finally to the sword of all men of heart, who as soon as possible will tear up this odious pact.

THE ENFORCED SACRIFICE.

Exhausted, powerless longer to resist, France ratified the treaty. The people of Alsace and Lorraine became the ransom of their fellow-citizens. The French nation bought peace and the right to live at the cost of the freedom of 1,500,000 of her children. Has Germany kept her part of the bargain ?

At the moment of leaving the Assembly the members for Alsace and Lorraine, shut out from

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

the bosom of their nation, thus yet again protested:—

Delivered up to foreign domination in despite of all justice and by a hateful abuse of force . . . we declare once again null and void the treaty that disposes of us without our consent. Each and all of us retain for ever the title to claim our rights. . . . Cut off at this hour from the common family, your brethren of Alsace and of Lorraine will preserve towards France, though she be absent from their hearths, the love of children until the day when she shall come again to take her place there.

The abuse of force towards France, falsehood towards Europe, violence towards the annexed population—these are the historical wrongs which this war must redress.

II.

THE FAILURE OF GERMANISATION.

THE hostility shown by the people of Alsace-Lorraine at the moment of the annexation persisted under German rule, though, during the course of nearly half a century, it took on different forms.

At first, the Alsatians simply stood by the Bordeaux protest. When their representatives entered the Reichstag, they demanded, in a resolution moved by the member for Saverne (Zabern), M. Teutsch, that the inhabitants of the annexed provinces should be consulted upon the annexation. The Reichstag received this demand with laughter and hooting. It voted the closure and silenced the other Alsatian members who were to have spoken. The motion was rejected without discussion and without division.

For twenty years the Alsatian Deputies were returned to Parliament, without any canvass or electioneering campaign, on the strength of a simple declaration that they would protest against the Treaty of Frankfort.

The most characteristic of these manifestations occurred during the general election of 1887. Though the German Government moved heaven and earth to secure the return of candidates favourable to the famous Septennate Army Bills, the Alsatians elected candidates of protest by overwhelming majorities. This was done despite

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

persecution by the authorities, without any recommendation from the Alsatian Press (which was muzzled), without public meetings (which were forbidden), and without electioneering literature of any kind save leaflets bearing the words : "You know me ; vote for me !"

The defeat of the German Government was proportionate to its efforts for success. It had refused to modify the dictatorship and the measures of coercion introduced in 1871 ; and, after the election, it sought to avenge itself by a system of oppression and violence more tyrannical than before. A whole series of prosecutions for high treason and for seditious crimes ; the expulsion of numbers of Alsatian citizens, including two members of the Reichstag ; the dissolution of Alsatian gymnastic and choral societies ; the dismissal of mayors ; and, finally, the closing of the French frontier by severe passport regulations, were some aspects of the punishments then inflicted on Alsace-Lorraine for her fidelity to the Bordeaux declaration.

FROM PROTEST TO ACTION.

Yet it was impossible to maintain indefinitely an attitude of simple protest. Such an attitude presupposed some hope of a speedy return to France. When the Alsatians recognised that France had given up all idea of a war of revenge, and that their liberation could only come in a more or less distant future, other tactics were necessary. If it was certain that, in her arrogance

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

and domineering spirit, Germany would one day let loose the great struggle, it was equally clear that a policy of mere protestation against the Treaty of Frankfort precluded efforts to improve the internal position of Alsace-Lorraine.

During the closing years of last century a new generation therefore changed the form of Alsatian resistance. The fight against the German dictatorship and the Laws of Exception became indeed more violent. But, in view of the occupation of all public offices by Germans, the watchword "Alsace-Lorraine for the Alsations" was launched. The attempt was made to obtain emancipation from Berlin and to secure for the annexed provinces an autonomy equal to that enjoyed in the Empire by the Federal States. The new generation, formed in German schools and Prussian barracks, found that it knew its tyrants better, and was more powerfully armed against them.

Yet it kept its love for France, the cult of the past and faith in a redeeming future. What was changed was the object of the immediate struggle. As the member for Colmar, M. Jacques Preiss, declared in the Reichstag in 1895 :—

While demanding respect for their good right, the people of Alsace-Lorraine do not imagine that France accepts as irrevocable the blow she has received, or her defeat ; they do not believe that she has forgotten what has been torn from her or humiliations like the entry of German troops into Paris. Were France other than we believe, she would no longer be herself. She would lose all her prestige in the world and would forfeit her place in history.

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

A GREAT GULF.

The divergence between the Alsatian and the German was not merely political and public ; it extended throughout the whole range of private life. The two classes of inhabitants—the indigenous and the immigrant—spoke different languages, had different customs and manners, had no social relations, and mixed neither in friendship nor marriage. The cold, reserved, and sulky bearing of the Alsatians towards the Germans, the boycott that made the conquerors feel sorely the contempt and aversion which inspired it, continued unabated, and, during the years immediately preceding the war, led to conflicts sharper than any that had occurred since the annexation.

The Germans recognised that Alsatian families were refractory to all kinds of Germanisation and that the children, upon whom they had counted to recognise German rule, brought from their home life anti-German ideas so deeply rooted that neither the school nor the barracks could extirpate them. Germanisation went bankrupt at the very point where it had placed its main investment. It was of this hostility on the part of the children and of their innate and instinctive anti-Germanism that the German school teachers, the authorities, and the German Press complained most bitterly. They themselves noisily announced their failure as a national disaster.

GERMANY'S ODISIOUS TYRANNY.

Then it was that the attempts at Germanisation took on their most odious form. The Germans

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

tried to abolish the Alsatian cult of the past, to efface the memory of the French regime, to destroy popular traditions, to Germanise women and girls, and to extend methods of tyranny into the most intimate features of family life. One of the best-known instances of this persecution was the war made upon the organisation called "Le Souvenir Alsacien-Lorrain," which tended the graves of the soldiers who fell in 1870.

A comical illustration of German methods was given during the Pan-German Congress held at Wiesbaden in 1911. A German pastor, named Spieser, described his fight for the "German idea" in Alsace and his horror at finding that, in the family of a fellow-pastor, French was spoken. Herr Pastor Spieser denounced this enormity, and, upon learning that the delinquent pastor tolerated French at the wish of his wife, sent him a scientific work entitled *Ueber den biologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* ("On the Biological Imbecility of Women"). The whole Congress vigorously applauded the courage and delicacy of Herr Pastor Spieser.

The irritation set up by these methods increased when it became known that the German Government had deliberately attempted to ruin the important Alsatian locomotive factory of Graffenstaden in order to install German industry in its place, and when the exploits of the notorious Lieutenant von Forstner and of Colonel von Reuter led to the Saverne (Zabern) affair. At that moment (January, 1914) the Berlin Prefect of Police made the significant declaration, which

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

should alone suffice to preclude discussion when peace is made : “In Alsace-Lorraine the German troops are in enemy country” (*in Feindesland*) ; to which the German Crown Prince added confirmation by his telegram : “*Nur fest drauf los !*” (“Let them have it hot!”)

III.

THE DUTY OF THE ALLIES.

THE view of the position in Alsace-Lorraine taken by the Germans is clearly indicated by their conduct since the beginning of the war. Why did the Germans, on the eve of mobilisation (July 30, 1914), arrest thousands of Alsatians—the leading personages of the country, their friends, and relations—and intern them in Germany for months and years until even the Reichstag protested against these proceedings? The only answer is that the Germans themselves had no confidence in the “German feelings” of Alsace, which the German Press advertises in foreign countries.

As soon as the state of siege was proclaimed, the German authorities forbade the use of any letter-paper with French headings or addresses. All manufactured articles had to bear labels in German. It was forbidden to speak French in the street, and the very names of the streets were changed. The Bishop of Strasburg, a German, forbade his clergy to wear cassocks, the French ecclesiastical dress. The Bishop of Metz, also a German, had the statues of Joan of Arc removed from the churches.

So numerous have been the condemnations by courts-martial since the war began that some time ago the shorter terms of imprisonment which they inflicted amounted in the aggregate to more than 3,000 years. The prisons are overflowing. Con-

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

demned Alsatians are given numbers entitling them to admission to prison as vacancies occur. The newspapers no longer venture to mention the offences for which these sentences are inflicted.

One tradesman was sent to prison for having told his shopmen, in French, one hot day to pull down the sun-blinds. An expression of doubt as to a German victory is punished by several weeks' imprisonment. One wag who remarked: "A meat card between two bread cards: what a sandwich!" was promptly locked up. For "high treason" an Alsatian judge was sentenced to three years' imprisonment with hard labour, and the member of the Reichstag for Mulhouse to ten years' imprisonment with hard labour. A forwarding agent of the same town, who had copied the addresses to which he had been instructed to send the furniture of a château looted by the Germans, was sentenced to death and shot. A workman of Guébwiler met the same fate for having accompanied his son to the frontier.

GERMAN ATROCITIES.

The expression "enemy country," used before the war by the Berlin Prefect of Police, was no exaggeration. From inquiries I have made among the German prisoners of war in France the German troops sent to Alsace were ordered to load their rifles because they were entering "enemy country." In some cases they were told: "Here the civilians are even more dangerous than in France." With such orders it is not

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

surprising that the troops should have behaved with the same "frightfulness" as in Belgium and in the North of France. Whole villages were burned to terrorise the population ; places where there was no fighting, like Dalheim, in Lorraine, and Linthal and Bourtzwiller, in Alsace, were thus destroyed. Some of the inhabitants were massacred on their thresholds ; others, awakened at night, were placed against a wall and shot, not only without a trial, but without knowing what was the complaint against them.

The German authorities at Mulhouse made an inquiry into the massacres, the burning, and the looting at Bourtzwiller. During the second French occupation of Mulhouse I found the records of this German inquiry into German atrocities. The Germans will thus have difficulty in denying facts that throw so peculiar a light upon their claim that Alsace is German.

THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE.

The Allies are agreed that the question of deciding to what State a population should belong can only be raised by the population themselves. The people of Alsace-Lorraine have never shown the slightest wish to be separated from France. Their spirit has not changed. Among the natives of the country, the Germans would not find 300 favourable to them ; the rest would demand to return to the French Motherland. That is why Germany has never dared to appeal to the will of the annexed inhabitants.

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

She now seeks to put forward the "reasons of race, language, and history" which Bismarck treated with contempt in 1871.

Alsace is united to France, with whom she has always had moral, intellectual, and artistic affinity, by an historical development of many centuries. At the end of the Middle Ages the Alsatians sought the protection of a State that could assure to them order at home and safety against enemies from outside. France undertook this work, and respected the customs, the traditions, and the language of the province. Thus the union with France took place with full popular consent. Alsace belonged to France while the modern ideas of patriotism and nationality were taking shape. The Departments of the Rhine had a glorious share in the wars that realised the idea of the French *patrie*. Nothing is more false than the German assertion that Alsace was "stolen" from Germany during a period of German weakness.

The language question is little understood by those who do not know Alsace. The dialect of Germanic origin spoken by the people is not good German. When the Government decreed that German must be spoken in the Strasburg Diet, and several Deputies wished to speak Alsatian, the members of the Government and the German immigrants refused them this right, declaring that it was impossible to understand what was said. Among themselves, Alsatians never speak German. For them it is a foreign language. They use either French or Alsatian.

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

On the question of race it is useless to insist. Scientific proofs, for what they are worth, have long confuted the German thesis. But the real point is that neither language, nor history, nor race provides a conclusive argument against the clearly expressed will of a people.

THE ALLIES' TASK.

What, then, is the task of the Allies? It is not to solve a "question," but to efface an act of violence and injustice and to re-establish the *status quo ante*. Who, in such case, can talk of a plebiscite? Germany has rendered impossible any regular and impartial plebiscite. On the morrow of her occupation she expelled all those who desired to retain French nationality. By introducing compulsory military service for Alsatians in the Prussian Army from 1872 onwards, she compelled the youth of Alsace for many years to leave the country. These "emigrants," who are profoundly attached to their little Fatherland, left it only in the hope of returning when Alsace should again be French. They could not be excluded from any plebiscite.

Moreover, since the outbreak of the present war, Germany has done her best to render impossible any appeal to the people. After having forced a great number of the inhabitants to flee from arrest and imprisonment without trial, she declared them to have forfeited Alsatian-Lorraine nationality. This fate befell the 4,000 men who took refuge in France, Switzerland, and England,

THE FUTURE OF ALSACE-LORRAINE

without speaking of the 33,000 who joined the French Army. Those who could not escape and were embodied in the German Army have been deliberately exposed, in the front line as "cannon fodder," to the shells of their brethren. Death has ravaged Alsace-Lorraine more than any part of Germany. The German intention is to prepare for an Alsace-Lorraine where, after the war, the German immigrants would live triumphant alongside of a wretched and impotent remnant of the former inhabitants.

The task of the Allies is therefore to re-establish the situation as it was before the annexation. The deliverance of Alsace can only be accomplished by annulling the deed that enslaved her in 1871; that is to say, by the reunion with France of the annexed territory, and by the restoration of French citizenship to all who lost it under the Treaty of Frankfurt.

Thus only can an Allied victory satisfy the honour of France, set free the Alsatian-Lorraine people, redress a crime, and assure the triumph of right.

